



Torah Reflections on *Shoftim* and the Month of *Elul* (Deuteronomy 16:18 – 21:19)

2 Elul 5769

August 22, 2009

The Torah includes many instances of familial struggle, tribal conflict, and outright war. These texts may be troubling or instructive in and of themselves. They can also be read with other layers of meaning.

Let us apply a couple of interpretive lenses to a selection from this week's Torah portion: "When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy (*bal tash-hit*) its fruit trees, wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down" (Deut. 20:19).

The term *bal tash-hit* is used in some Jewish environmental circles to highlight the values of conserving resources and not being wanton or wasteful with God's Creation—for the mitzvah of *bal tash-hit* demands a degree of care and attention to the preservation or non-destruction of fruit trees even in times of war. This interpretive approach to the text addresses issues of trees and fields and battlefield behavior, leading to issues of responsibility toward our natural environment beyond wartime.

The same text can be read in a more metaphorical way, yielding insights and teachings about the battles and internal struggles we sometimes face in our lives. Some traditional Torah commentaries find, within the battle imagery, wisdom addressing the interplay between the different parts of ourselves; and the sometimes-conflicted drives, energies, forces, and yearnings we each carry within us. With this interpretive lens we may see the land, the besieged city, the attacking army, and the fruit trees as parts of our world—or as parts of us right now, internal to our psyche and spirit. We are invited to ask ourselves: what parts of my life feel embattled? And in those areas, what might fruit trees represent in the context of my life-struggles? As with the environmental reading, we can learn from the Torah's level of concern for trees that may bear fruit after battle.

The experience of illness or pain or loss may call forth feelings of struggle, mustering of internal resources, preparing for a kind of siege. Many people speak of battling against disease, buckling down through invasive treatments, fighting to recover, or wrestling with "the system" or with one's family, employers, finances, etc. The metaphor of battle is violent and ridden with conflict*. It assumes there will be casualties and acknowledges that parts of the landscape of our lives are likely to get trampled. In fact many medical treatments, such as surgery, antibiotic medications, chemotherapy, and radiation, involve some physical harm or diminishment on the road to a more complete healing.

In struggling with illness or loss, we can identify what parts of ourselves may yet (we hope) bear fruit again in future seasons, and protect that. These may include our resolve, special loving relationships, our love of learning or our propensity for spiritual growth, our appreciation for the beauty and blessings around us, our sense of humor or optimism, our capacity to love, or our basic humanity. Whatever those precious, life-affirming parts of ourselves we identify, they deserve to be protected and nurtured

throughout our ordeals. They often hold out hope for the future, and sustenance for the present as well.

Elul

The new moon (Rosh Hodesh) and the Hebrew month of Elul appear on Sunday, August 31st – Monday September 1st. Elul is the month that leads up to Rosh Hashanah and the Days of Awe culminating with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. It is the month in which we are invited to prepare for the High Holy Days. For some people, that involves sending out New Year cards and good wishes; or making plans to be with loved ones and attend synagogue; or preparing invitations and menus for special holiday meals.

In the seasons of human relationships set out in our tradition, Elul is a propitious time for a soulful and honest reflection on our actions of the past year. We may ask ourselves: whom did I harm, hurt, or mistreat, in any way—whether intentionally or inadvertently; and how have I transgressed or neglected my obligations to the Holy One. In both areas, we are encouraged, in Elul, to seek *teshuvah*—a healing or a restoration of those relationships—to the extent possible. In Elul the mood and the blessings embedded in the calendar support us in the often-difficult work of changing our lives for the better. For all who yearn to begin the Jewish New Year joyfully and with a “clean slate”, Elul is the prime time to go to our loved ones—and deeply within ourselves—to earnestly ask for and to grant forgiveness. According to the Talmud, it is that work in reaching forgiveness with others in our lives which paves the way for our wholehearted and prayerful approach to God for forgiveness.

May Source of Life that nurtures blossom into fruit and that stirs our hearts toward *teshuvah* strengthen us at this time—for life and for love, for uprightness and for forgiveness, for healing and for blessing.

* For several alternative, spiritually-based perspectives, see [Speak the Language of Healing: Living With Breast Cancer Without Going to War](#), by Susan Kuner, Carol Orsborne, Linda Quigley, and Karen Stroup.

This year, *Parashat Shoftim* is read during the week leading up to and including August 22nd (2 Elul, 5769); the month of Elul spans August 21 – September 18, 2009

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This Torah Reflection was written by Rabbi Natan Fenner of the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center in San Francisco. It is brought to you by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, an affiliate of the Institute on Aging and a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties.



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